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Lucia A Keegan 07/19/2006 05:30:09 PM From DB/Inbox: Lucia A Keegan

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C O N F I D E N T I A L PARIS 04889

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 004889

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/18/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [AEMR](#) [MARR](#) [CASC](#) [LE](#) [KHLS](#) [FR](#)
SUBJECT: TFLE01: FRENCH PRIME MINISTER DE VILLEPIN'S
MISSION TO BEIRUT

REF: PARIS 04850

Classified By: POLITICAL MINISTER COUNSELOR JOSIAH ROSENBLATT, Reason 1
.4 B/D

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: French Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and Foreign Minister Douste-Blazy traveled to Lebanon on July 17 to meet with Lebanese Prime Minister Siniora and the local French community. In the absence of the PM's Diplomatic Counselor, Political Minister Counselor called on the PM's Strategic Affairs advisor, Frederic Mondolini on the afternoon of July 18 to obtain a readout on the mission and to thank the GoF for its assistance on July 17 in evacuating Amcits from Lebanon. Mondolini, who accompanied the Prime Minister, characterized the trip as politically vital, given the strong ties between the two countries and the large number of French citizens living in Lebanon. He stressed that the PM had consulted closely with Israeli PM Olmert to ensure not only the security of the mission, but to underscore France's humanitarian goals. The GOF, he said, was focused on evacuating its citizens and supporting international efforts towards an immediate cease-fire, whether through the G8, the UN, or other appropriate international fora. Mondolini said Villepin did not believe there was a military solution to Hezbollah's disarmament, carefully noting he was not speaking for the Presidency or MFA. Poloff met separately with MFA acting Sous Director (Deputy Office Director equivalent) Martin Juillard, who gave

a similar, though less detailed account of the PM and FM's trip. END SUMMARY

¶2. (C) Political Minister Counselor called on PM de Villepin's Counselor for Strategic Affairs, Frederic Mondolini, on the afternoon of July 18 to get a full briefing on the Prime Minister's July 17 mission to Lebanon. Mondolini, who accompanied the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, characterized the trip as necessary to mark the deep friendship long shared between the two nations. With 17,000 French nationals living in Lebanon, four to five thousand French tourists, and thousands of other EU nationals also resident, the GoF, he said, needed to convey a clear statement that it was doing everything possible to take care of its citizens and evacuate those asking for assistance.

¶3. (C) Mondolini reported that the trip was scheduled after PM de Villepin spoke by phone early Sunday morning to President Chirac, who was still in St. Petersburg. He went on to say that in preparation for the trip, PM de Villepin called Israeli PM Olmert to advise him of his plan to visit Lebanese PM Siniora in Beirut and a French ship that would be arriving to evacuate some 1,200 French, and possibly EU and US nationals. PM Olmert said he recognized and understood France's ties to the region and agreed to cooperate on the technical details, specifically security issues. French Ambassador Araud in Tel Aviv, Mondolini said, had not picked up any negative commentary about the trip from the Israelis, who seemed to understand France's motivations. The France/Israel relationship had made significant improvement in the past few years, and this was proof. Mondolini added that PM de Villepin and PM Olmert avoided getting into a serious political discussions as their conversation was taking place at the same time the G8 were negotiating their communiqu.

¶4. (U) PM de Villepin spent three hours in Lebanon, from about 17:00 to 20:00. After arriving in Beirut by helicopter from Cyprus, he met with PM Siniora, and proceeded to the ship where he addressed the evacuees. The PM expressed France's solidarity and friendship to the Lebanese PM, and later in a joint press conference condemned the violence, the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers, called for urgent action to stabilize Lebanon and the region, and noted that France was active in the international efforts to obtain a cease-fire. In particular, France expressed its willingness to participate in a possible UN border observer mission in South Lebanon. He said that in the immediate future any solution would have to include three elements: the safe return of kidnapped Israeli soldiers, the cessation of rocket attacks into Israel, and a halt to Israeli military operations. PM de Villepin underscored the importance of UNSCR 1559 and reiterated the GoF's efforts as part of the international community to seek an immediate truce. Finally, he pledged that France and the EU would assist in humanitarian efforts, and when appropriate, contributions towards rebuilding Lebanon.

¶5. (C) Mr. Mondolini pointed to the July 18 Le Monde (French daily) headline, "Chirac and Bush Want to Neutralize Hezbollah," commenting that France and the US were looking in the same direction, but that all of the elements of an agreed strategy remain to be fleshed out. Speaking for de Villepin's office, he said that achieving a positive change to the status quo ante in Lebanon would be extremely complicated. The PM did not see a military solution to the disarmament of Hezbollah. Efforts to eradicate Hezbollah though force would ultimately fail to bring long term stability. Hezbollah was not only a terrorist organization, but certain elements had now become part of the democratic landscape, had a great deal of support in Lebanon, and most certainly had various agendas. Mondolini pointed to President's Chirac's Bastille Day speech in which he alluded to Iran's probable involvement in Hezbollah's capture of the two Israeli soldiers, giving clear expression to the GoF's suspicions and concerns about Iran's role. That said, he carefully noted that the French had no "concrete

intelligence." The views he expressed were his own and those, he thought, of the Prime Minister, but carefully stated he was not speaking for the MFA or the Presidency.

16. (C) Poloff met earlier in the day with MFA acting Sous Director (Deputy Office Director equivalent) Martin Juillard, who gave a similar, though less detailed account of the PM and FM's trip. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he said, was concentrating heavily on evacuations and international efforts towards an immediate cease-fire. The GoF was working through international fora, remaining open to any and all possibilities that might contribute to a cessation of the violence. Throughout the meeting, he repeatedly added that France had no intention to pursue its own national strategy, and was committed to working with the international community.

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